

Abilene, Kansas

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USDA offers programs to aid area due to increased Fort Riley growth

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Expansion of Fort Riley could inject significant growth to local economies that are within 60 miles of the Army base.

Additional troops and civilians relocating to Fort Riley and eventually the transfer of the Big Red One from Germany will result in a large influx of soldiers and their families, according to congressional sources.

Chuck Banks, state director of rural development for the United States Department of Agriculture, said programs have been developed to try to help meet the need for infrastructure in northcentral and northeast Kansas. Rural development is the economic and community development wing of USDA.

Gary Smith, a rural development official, said about \$25 million was set aside for housing issues.

The programs are separate from production agriculture subsidies.

The Fort Riley Regional Initiative was put into effect to help with the expected arrival of 3,400 military and 1,200 civilians during the next year. The return of the First Infantry Division, commonly known as the "Big Red One," will mean many more soldiers will be based in Fort Riley during the next few years, officials said.

Banks said the \$25 million is the initial injection for a guaranteed housing loan program. If interest continues, then the program in all likelihood would expand.

The rural development wing signed an agreement with Fort Riley, Banks said. Half of the effort will be spent working with Fort Riley personnel and their families. A temporary office will be opened in October. The other half is spent concentrating on needs in the communities.

Banks said the work of a united congressional delegation that included U.S. Reps. Jim Ryun, Jerry Moran, Dennis Moore and Todd Tiahrt, as well as Sens. Pat Roberts and Sam Brownback paid off for Kansas.

"The leader of the flag is Sen. Pat Roberts," Banks said. "We are so appreciative of him."

Harold Stones, the senator's chief aide in his Topeka office, said Roberts was always optimistic about Fort Riley, even during the early process of the Base Realignment and Closure review process. The senator told his staff that BRAC represented a potential opportunity.

Stones, a retired banker, said economic development is best served when new money is injected into the community. Growth in population generates new tax dollars for a community and increased enrollment for schools.

Stones read a statement from the senator, in which Roberts said he was very proud of the young men and women who serve in today's military. Because today's military is served by volunteers, they have offered tremendous educational and technical skills. The soldiers are much more stable with their families and the military is making commitments for them to stay longer at posts.

The senator also has made it known he is supportive of investing in family support centers to aid families when a spouse is deployed.

Roberts believes that once the soldiers and their families relocate to Fort Riley and its area, they will quickly embrace the wholesome and friendliness of Kansas as well as the educational, recreational and diverse ways to share their faith.

"Fort Riley expansion is a reality," said Abilene community development director James Holland, who helped organize the meeting.

Bill Moore, who is the area director for rural development, said his Manhattan office has received overwhelming attendance at meetings. About 80 people attended the Abilene meeting. He said housing is the No. 1 issue, but day care is the No. 2 issue.

The Abilene stop was one of four stops by USDA rural development in this area. Besides a stop in Clay Center and here, upcoming meetings will be Aug. 18 in Council Grove and Aug. 19 in Wamego.

Banks said a year ago the rural development office provided \$152 million in resources to the Kansas economy. About \$80 million was designated for housing.

"This is a tremendous opportunity," Banks said. "When you lose population, you lose your economic engine."

The state director said embracing the Fort Riley expansion could provide northcentral and northeast Kansas communities with a once in a lifetime opportunity to grow in population, add housing and expand businesses.

"This is a rare opportunity," Banks said.

Round tables were conducted by members of the rural development office, Kansas Department of Commerce and Housing and federal home lending programs. Round table topics were lenders, realtors and developers, business and community programs, federal loan programs and multi-housing issues.

The representatives went through program availabilities. They encouraged those who had an interest in receiving grants to be thinking ahead.

Rural development official Gary Smith said, "good planning and doing your homework" is essential for an applicant to be looked upon favorably. "Funding can happen within 30 days if you have everything in place."

He said applicants need to remember that USDA officials do use guidelines of "what you want versus what you need."

Having a well-developed plan prepared in advance is crucial, he said.